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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAGHDAD 001444

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV IZ

SUBJECT: PRT WASIT GETS A LAUGH

Classified By: PRT Team Leader Rob Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) This is a PRT Wasit reporting cable

¶2. (C) Summary: In Al Kut on May 4, the PRT sponsored what was alledged to be the first comedic play to be performed in Southern Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein. Despite a reported \$100,000 bribe offered to the organizer to call off the play, the much-loved actors of the hit Iraqi television sitcom Mud House went ahead with a free performance of an original script, "Nas wa nas" (People and people). The crawler that appeared that evening on an Iraqi Satellite channel described the event with typical understatement: "The Berlin Wall is falling in Wasit due to Iraqi efforts and those of their friends." End Summary.

¶3. (U) "Nas wa nas" was performed at the Kut Municipality Hall, a venue that has the capacity to seat eight-hundred people. Security for the event was organized and provided by Provincial Director of Police, MG Abd Al Haneen Hamud Faysal Al Amir. According to estimates made by Iraqi Police responsible for securing the site, roughly 4,500 people showed up for the event. The auditorium was filled to capacity with 1,500 Wasit natives of all ages, professions, and backgrounds. Television crews, KSWAT and Iraqi Police were interspersed amongst the families that filled the theater.

AMERICAN 'IRAQI SOCCER STARS'

¶4. (U) Opening remarks for the event were given by CDR 214 Fires Brigade (FB) and PRT IPA0. As the two approached the stage, the crowd erupted with wild and unexpected applause. A local national said the crowd's reaction for the CDR and IPA0 mirrored the way Iraqis receive their soccer stars. CDR 214th FB keyed on the bravery of Iraqi Security forces in providing security for Wasit residents and PRT IPA0 spoke about the value of comedy and its ability to break down barriers.

¶5. (U) The "Mud House" star power and the absence of political commentary were key factors in the success of "Nas wa nas." The hour-long comedy followed a traditional farming family from Wasit on their journey to the bright lights of Baghdad. (Background: Mud House is a popular Iraqi sitcom that just finished its second season on al-Sumeria SAT TV. The sitcom highlights the spontaneity and simplicity of agrarian Iraqi life in the 1950s. Mud House's popularity cuts across the spectrum of Iraqi society; the older generation identifies with nostalgic memories while university students have borrowed nicknames from the characters of the series. Filming of the third season will start in June. End background.)

¶6. (U) Immediately after the Sunday showing the organizer, backed by the actors themselves, appealed to the PRT to support a command performance the next night. He reported that the second night was a bigger hit than the first and included an emotional encore by the actors. The event's organizer said "Nas wa nas" opened a "small hole in the wall that has been built by political and religious groups in

Wasit since 2003." He remarked that "sports and arts are the only things that Iraqis agree on."

ISCI REPS NOT THEATER FANS... OR ARE THEY?

¶7. (C) According to the organizer, days before the event he was approached by a man representing ISCI who offered him \$100,000 to cancel the play. The organizer was clear that no threats were made and proudly relayed that he turned down the bribe with the Arabic adage "return with the question when I've lost my honor and integrity."

¶8. (C) Comment: The event, covered by FOX News and a wide range of Iraqi print, radio and satellite television, was a tremendous Public Diplomacy success. The large turnout indicates that a significant segment of al Kut's population is comfortable with apolitical entertainment, void of religious references. While the claimed \$100,000 bribe offer may be invention or exaggeration, the PRT's Iraqi collaborator proved to be an excellent event organizer and we have plans to continue working with him on future cultural projects in Wasit. As for the event itself, no PRT member that attended has ever seen so many Iraqis smiling and laughing. End comment.

CROCKER